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ABSTRACT

In 1993, Ambassador Walter Annenberg gave $500 million to address issues of school reform in the United States. A portion of this, known as the Rural Challenge, was dedicated to rural school reform. The four aspects of the Rural Challenge--a grants program, public policy initiative, public engagement effort, and large evaluation--provide a framework for reexamining some fundamental questions about the purposes and processes of education. Three central issues are addressed: "what is education for?", "whose interests are being served?", and "who gets the say about what happens in public schools?" Current thinking holds the purpose of education to be economic competitiveness and gain, which benefits those who play the stock market. The agenda for public education has increasingly moved away from local communities to the state and national level. The overall effect has been to educate rural students to leave their communities to find work. The Rural Challenge proposes that the purpose of education should be the health of the community, rather than individual career achievement. This requires place-based education, which connects schools and communities to local natural and cultural resources, thus grounding the curriculum in that local place. The 24 Rural Challenge projects are developing place-based education. These projects show that when students learn in and about their community, they contribute directly to the viability of that community. The real challenge lies in using these experiences to shape public policy in order that the rules and regulations that stifle a more powerful approach to learning may be changed. (TD)

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PLACE VALUE:
Experiences from the Rural Challenge

Paul Nachtigal

ED 421 311

What I would like to do is lay out pieces of the frame for place-based education, both in terms of the larger Annenberg Challenge, of which the Rural Challenge and this particular project are a part, as well as basic issues about school reform, and the rationale for why the Rural Challenge is doing what it is doing.

A little background, particularly for those who may be new to this endeavor, and your first association with anything called a "Rural Challenge." In 1993, Ambassador Walter Annenberg made the decision to give away $500 million dollars of his own wealth to address the issues of school reform in this country. It is certainly the largest philanthropic gift that has ever been given to public education. It is a challenge, which means that he wants his money matched by private and public money, to work on school reform issues.

It began with a series of urban challenges; there were five, originally: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. Somewhere along the way folks began to talk to his advisor, who happens to be the president of Brown University, and persuaded him that if he was really serious about public school reform, that he had to pay attention to those schools which are outside of the urban centers. So we began to work on a Rural Challenge, which is a fifty million dollar effort, five years, to be matched dollar for dollar, and we got underway on the first of July in 1995.

The challenge is very much a decentralized effort. Each city has its own culture, its own social and economic dynamics, and each operates within the particular political and policy environment of that state. So the approaches which the various challenges have taken have had some similarities, but also some differences. This is certainly true also for the Rural Challenge, which is a national project. We work in all fifty states. Each of those states is a very different entity. In general, the urban challenges have worked in a fairly traditional way, from my perspective, around the business of school reform. They are focusing on ways to try to improve student achievement, very much on what happens within the educational institution itself.

Interestingly enough, one of the strategies they are using is to try to make small schools out of big schools. New York City is working very hard to try to get community sized schools operating where there are some of the strengths, which we have realized, in small rural schools. The Rural Challenge is a bit different, it is more concerned with working with sites who are interested in reexamining some of the fundamental questions of purposes and processes of education. It is not just about, "How do we improve student achievement," although that is important. The Rural Challenge carries out its work with four different initiatives: the providing of grants, of which Selborne has one and there are now 24 other projects which are up and underway; a public policy initiative, which is headed up by Marty Strange; a public engagement effort; and a large evaluation effort, headed up by Vito Perrone of Harvard, and we have at least two evaluators attending this meeting.

Mark K. Baldwin

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Taken as a whole these four efforts, the grants program, the public policy, the public engagement, and the evaluation, in a sense, provides a framework for an on-going forum, an on-going conversation about public education in rural America. In our more optimistic moments, when we talk with our colleagues from the cities, we think we have some things to teach them, as well.

The Rural Challenge brings a particular perspective to the business of school reform, which will unfold as we go on.

It seems to me that there are three central issues that we need to address in this ongoing conversation. It is around some fundamental questions, the first of which is "What is education for?" A second is "Whose interests are being served?" very closely related to the first, obviously. The third critical issue is "Who gets the say about what happens in public schools?" Those of you that took history of education will recall that whatever is not clearly defined at one level of national, state, and local decision-making gets passed down to the next local level. If you look at the federal Constitution, there is nothing said about public education, so that becomes a state function. Historically, the states have handed that responsibility down to local communities and down to local school boards. So decisions about public education have been very close to local communities. Within my lifetime, there have been public schools in central Kansas, in small German communities, where school lasted eight months rather than nine. As soon as public school was out, German school started in the same building, with a curriculum defined by local communities, to meet the needs of those communities.

We have come a long way from that, and Dr. Cooper presented a very different world view of how education is in the country, at this point. If you think a bit about purposes of education, from what he said, the primary purpose is economic gain, economic competitiveness, not only within this country but at the global level, that is the bottom line for the purposes of education. If you think about who gets served in that kind of a system, my indicators are taking a look at the stock market, and the fact that if unemployment gets too low the stock market drops. There are some folks who are benefiting and have made decisions about how education operates that have some fairly narrow interests.

You will discover, as we go along, that Dr. Cooper's world view and my world view of what education is about are two different things. We've gotten to this place over a long period of time. In 1914, Elwood P. Coverly, who was one of the education professionals at the time, who was one of the notables who set public education on the path of adopting an industrialized factory model of education, a common urban model, in many ways, of how public schools operated, had this to say: "Don't underestimate the problem of school reform, because the rural school is today in a state of arrested development, burdened by educational traditions, lacking in effectual supervision, controlled largely by rural people, who too often do not realize either their own needs, or the possibilities of rural education, taught by teachers, who generally speaking, have but little comprehension of rural life problems. The task of reorganizing and redirecting rural education is difficult and will necessarily be slow."

If I heard the message right yesterday, we are much in the same position. There are folks out there who are defining what the problems of schooling are and the solutions for those problems of schooling. The consequences of that approach to public education have been particularly difficult for rural places in at least three ways. One, the agenda for public education has indeed moved further and further away from local communities to the state and national level, contributing to the growing schism between schools and communities. Schools have become a part of a specialized system whose purposes have been defined somewhere else, and whose interest is being served out there, somewhere.

This factory model of schooling, far too often, equates quality and quantity. Bigger is better. And because rural schools and rural communities are always smaller, by definition they are also always second best. We've lived for a long time with the depictions of rural America, on television and in papers, about the Beverly Hillbillies, and if, in fact, you really want to be successful, you leave rural communities. What this model of schooling has done best, is to educate rural students to leave their local communities, to find a job somewhere else. That's bad news if we want to keep a healthy rural sector in this country.

One way of looking at public education, is that it is a conspiracy, if you will, of a whole set of forces of an extractive society which sees rural communities as the headwaters of that extraction. Whether it's timber, agriculture, mining, or human resources, this country has extracted those resources from those rural places and put very little back.

That's one view of education. I'd like to suggest that what we are about is quite a different view, and start this piece by quoting from Wendell Berry, a farmer in eastern Kentucky, a writer, a poet, a philosopher, and an educator. He says, "My approach to education would be like my approach to everything else, I'd change the standard. I would make the standard that of community health, rather than the career of the student. You see, if you make the standard the health of the community, that would change everything. Once you begin to ask, 'What would be the best thing for our community, what's the best thing we can do here for our community?' You can't rule out any kind of knowledge. You need to know everything you can possibly know. Once you raise the health of the community, all departmental walls fall down. You can no longer feel that it is safe not to know something. You begin to see that these specializations aren't separate at all, but are connected."

That is a different view of education than individual achievement, than individual competition, than getting to the top, than just having education be career development. It seems to me that you can argue this approach to education from a number of perspectives. We know that learning becomes more powerful when it is hands on, when it is engaged in real problem solving, when it is experiential, when it is focused on local place, connected to individual students' past understanding. We know learning is more powerful when it is interdisciplinary, when it is done cooperatively with others, and when it results in a product that is useful to someone else.

David Orr, in his book, *Ecological Literacy*, argues that place-based education is important for four reasons. First, it requires a combination of intellect with experience, direct observation, investigation, experimentation, and skill in the application of knowledge. Second, the study of place is relevant to the problems of overspecialization, which has been called a terminal disease of contemporary society. That is reinforced all the way along in the way schools are organized, in the way teachers are trained, in the way we think about content, in the way we think about educational purposes. Third, the study of place is important in education or reeducating people in the art of living well where they are. Living well in community may well be the ultimate goal of education. Finally, knowledge of place, where you are, and where you come from, is intertwined with knowledge of who you are. Landscape, Orr says in other words, shapes mindscape.

We happen to be privileged to live on the side of a mountain in Colorado, with a hundred and eighty degree view of Lake Granby over to the Continental Divide. You think differently in that kind of a setting than you do in another setting, where the office is, for instance. It is hard to think small thoughts as thunderstorms roll across that valley and when rainbows appear to grow out of the water, it is a different perspective.

So here we are, the Selborne Project with its in-depth study of a square kilometer of

land, which not only helps students know that particular place in depth, but provides the skills to know other places as they journey throughout life.

The Rural Challenge now has 24 projects, probably involving upwards of 200 schools and communities, all engaged in some way in developing place-based education. All of them, in some way, reconnecting schools with local communities. Geographically, they range from Alabama to Alaska. From Alabama, where they are doing a lot with local histories, where students are publishing community newspapers, where they are involved in organic gardening, where they are engaged in creating community celebrations around music and local stories, to a project in Alaska, which involves all five native groups, and is an attempt to bring together native ways of knowing with western ways of knowing, so that native students can be educated within their culture rather than outside their culture. Projects range from the Rio Grande Valley to South Dakota, where they have done an economic study of that community related to lagging sales tax receipts. The students have been given credit for increasing those sales tax receipts by 27% or $7 million, by surfacing to that community the fact that if you would spend an additional 15% of your income within this community, it would become healthy economically. By raising those issues, by surfacing that conversation in the broader community, they have contributed directly to the viability of that community.

Each of these projects, it seems to me, is revisiting those three central questions. What are the purposes of education? Whose interests are served and who gets the say? They are taking back some responsibility for making those decisions. I know that is taking place in a very hostile policy environment, if that is your perspective. Not only in New York, but for sure in Pennsylvania, and for sure in most of the other states across the country. I'm persuaded, and I could be totally wrong, that the waves of reform that Dr. Cooper so nicely spelled out yesterday, and the failures of those reform efforts were not failures because there are not smart people around or the intentions are not good, but it seems to me, a fundamental rethinking is needed, which does, in fact, reconnect the process of education with life in communities, which does, in fact, relate purposes of education back to a reality which students connect with. Taking it out of the abstract textbook-sitting-on-your-desk way of thinking. So I think they all do address those three important issues of the purposes, of whose interests are served, and who gets the say.

Now comes the hard part. We have this array of projects and we will have some additional ones before we are through, but there are some really tough questions ahead about how we move this approach to teaching and learning across the curriculum on all grade levels. We heard wonderful examples from England yesterday. If that is good education for a day a week, why can't that be good education every day of every week? How do we use these experiences to ground an ever expanding, ever richer conversation in each of these communities, and other communities across the country, to get a different conversation about the role of public schools? How do we use these experiences to shape public policy so that the rules and regulations which stifle a more powerful approach to learning may be changed? Fortunately, that is Marty's job, but we are working together on this, and it is a very, very tough set of issues.

So this is the work of the Rural Challenge. In a recent meeting of the board, they came up with a fairly concise statement. The Rural Challenge is about good schools--public institutions--serving and served by their communities. These schools and communities are working together on academic excellence, and the capacity to live well sustainably. Both are important. We encourage schools and communities to act on the belief that every person contributes to our shared culture. Nobody is thrown away, we are not interested in educating only the elite, those that are first in the world in math and science.

Finally, we are interested in working with schools and communities connecting to the local, natural, and cultural resources--grounding the curriculum in that local place. This is the work that we are about. It is fairly ambitious. I believe we will never accomplish it in my lifetime, but we have a chunk of money, and we have some time and, we think, some ideas that are worth pursuing. We are pleased that you are a part of the conversation, and I wish you well in this work, and in our efforts to weave all these projects in this conversation into a different world view for public education.